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E2 CULTURE

JUAN RODRIGUEZ'S ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE: PART 7 OF 7

The sound of redemption

ONE RELATIONSHIP brought about a return to rock criticism; another reignited a pure love of music

Longtime Gazette contributor Juan Rodriguez has enjoyed a vantage point on rock 'n' roll that few listeners – or even critics – have experienced. Before the music industry became a well-oiled machine, he found himself with enviable access to some of the biggest names to pass through Montreal, as well as some of the city's brightest stars. In this weekly series, he looks back at the moments that stand out in his career.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

The big touring event of 1988 was Human Rights Now!, a benefit for Amnesty International, starring Bruce Springsteen, Peter Gabriel, Sting, Tracy Chapman and Youssou N'Dour, brought to you by the concerned folks at Reebok (which "left U B U").

I was suspicious of rock stars promoting their careers as do-gooders, so I wrote an opinion piece for the Toronto Star (Rock Aid Concerts: Social Conscience or Smug Exploitation?). I brought out the hammer. A few morsels:

"The rock stars got what they wanted — an image of worldly concerned citizens, immune from the barbs of critics, an image that helps sell records filled with the latest rock pop pap. The occasional 'protest' song is so lamely written and buried in high-tech production values that it is savoured like apple pie and ice cream. ... The Live Aid benefit treated fans to an all-star marathon in which Led Zeppelin reuniting meant more to couch potatoes than Ethiopia. When Sally Field arrived with tipped spiels on hunger, viewers could rush to the toilet and grab more beer and pretzels.

"We Are the World set the tone for today's 'protest' style. By blithely avoiding the stomach-turning thought of famine in breezy All You Need Is Love fashion, it was embraced as an 'America first' ditty"

And so it went. The piece was published the day before Amnesty hit the Olympic Stadium. The morning of the show, I received a frantic call from a Toronto Star editor saying a wire story reported that Sting and Gabriel had issued statements demanding an apology, suggesting they would boycott future Toronto shows. The horror! The horror! (Never mind that this seemed to contradict Amnesty's principles of freedom of speech.) The editor asked me to attend the show and report on any onstage announcements regarding the piece.

Damn — the first show I'd covered in eight peaceful years, and I'd have to sit through the whole thing!

The concert was sold out, but I managed to procure a ticket from a scalper ($40) and proceeded to search for the press box. A Reebok rep attended to my case, assuring me that although he disagreed with my piece, he thought I was well intentioned, that maybe Sting and Gabriel were overreacting in the heat of the moment. Arriving at the box, I glanced around for the usual suspects on the rock beat. Apparently, there weren't any. "Geez," I thought, "there's been a big turnover since I quit the scene." I began taking notes, back in the saddle yet again, not wanting to foul up. The show moved as slowly as an elephant, each act performing close to a full set. I found it strange that no star said anything on stage about Amnesty, political dissidents, dictatorships, etc. Between sets, as paying customers lined up to take a leak or a brew, the giant screen flashed commercials for Amnesty that nobody was paying any attention to.

Another funny thing: the press box seemed very well heeled — folks in pressed designer jeans, Reebok T-shirts and bomber jackets. Smoked salmon canapés made the rounds. When someone asked me if everything was to my liking, I replied, "Where am I?" Answer: "The Reebok box." I asked to go to the press box. "We can't let you go there — you're lucky enough to be here."

Lucky? Lucky enough to know what I wasn't missing. Rock was just another big business in the '80s, an era drunk on big biz.

In 1989 I moved to Berkeley to visit an old flame. Across the San Francisco Bay, it was a city of sunshine 315 days a year where tie-dye T-shirts and holistic therapies were hawked on Telegraph Ave.

A neighbour was Robert Hurwitt, then theatre critic and an editor at the East Bay Express, a weekly known as a writers' paper. Which meant concert reviews, not being overnight assignments, allowed the writer to go long (up to 1,800 words). Thus I started reviewing the odd concert, almost at random (from Skid Row to Isaac Hayes to the Modern Jazz Quartet). Of two shows I saw within 48 hours, I began, "Let me count the ways that Wayne Newton and Genesis are alike."

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When the Amnesty International benefit tour Human Rights Now! stopped at the Olympic Stadium in September 1988 — with a lineup featuring Youssou N'Dour, left, Sting, Bruce Springsteen and Peter Gabriel — at least one person in attendance wasn't buying into the philanthropy.

DAVE SIDAWAY/GAZETTE FILES

ROCK 'N' ROLL LIFE ONLINE

Each week, we've been posting content on our website and mobile apps to accompany this series. Check out video interviews with Juan Rodriguez, playlists (available on the website only) related to each week's instalment, vintage photos, a forum for readers to submit their own rock 'n' roll stories, and more. montrealgazette.com/rocknroll

ALLEN MCINNIS/GAZETTE FILES

Back in town: Juan Rodriguez shares a laugh with bartender Elizabeth Sharp at Ziggy's in 1997, the year after he returned to Montreal.

Previous instalments in this series

The following articles are archived at montrealgazette.com/rocknroll

Week 1: Portrait of the critic as a young man.

Week 2: The unlikely interview that kick-started a career.

Week 3: In a blur of assignments, Janis Joplin and James Brown stood out.

Week 4: On the receiving end of Leonard Cohen's love and hate; deflating Bruce Springsteen's hype; an education in authenticity at the Esquire Show Bar.

Week 5: A close encounter with Pink Floyd's fans; a prime seat at The Last Waltz; Paul Anka does it his way.

Week 6: At home chez nous; Neil Young soundtracks the critic's fade into the black.

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